

Institution: King's College London		
Unit of Assessment: 34 Communication, Cultural and Media Studies, Library and Information Management		
Title of case study: Framing Immersive Cinema: Supporting Sector Growth, Workforce Equality and Audience Development		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: November 2015–2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Sarah Atkinson	Professor of Screen Media	Sept 2015–present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2016–2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		

1. Summary of the impact

Before King's research, there was only limited understanding of the production processes, economic potential and value to audiences of 'immersive cinema' as an emerging UK sector. This meant the sector lacked opportunities to secure recognition, commissioning and funding, and to build sustained communities of practice. King's research has increased understanding and awareness of immersive cinema amongst arts funders and the wider entertainment sector. Through its findings and industry collaborations, the research has benefited arts funders, immersive cinema practitioners and audiences: enabling new sector definitions, the development of new communities of practice, funding opportunities, advocacy for gender equality within the sector and new approaches to programming.

2. Underpinning research

Working at the intersection of Media, Film, Games and Communication Studies scholarship, Atkinson is the first scholar internationally to undertake interdisciplinary in-depth research into the 'immersive cinema' sector. This is a part of the UK film economy that has emerged over the past decade – it includes virtual reality, mixed reality and entertainment experiences (such as the immersive screenings of Secret Cinema) – and is now one of the fastest growing entertainment sectors globally. But despite its rapidly expanding popularity, arts funders and the wider entertainment sector have had limited understanding of immersive cinema: what it is, how its production systems work and what value it generates for its audiences and for the economy.

Supported by grants from diverse funders, Atkinson's work employed case studies and sustained embedded research within independent film practice. This included the use of focus groups and semi-structured interviews with practitioners and audiences in locations across the UK. The research design placed partnership with industry professionals at its centre: including a sustained research collaboration between Atkinson and the National Theatre, Omnibus Theatre and Edible Cinema, in order to test and develop findings through a process of action research.

King's research has demonstrated how immersive cinema is made

Through these methods, Atkinson's research demonstrated, for the first time, how immersive cinema is made. The evolution of the immersive cinema sector was traced through a series of publications [1,2,3,4,5,6], including studies of cross-sector collaborations and technological innovations [3,5,6]. Atkinson's work documented the scale and complexity of the production chains involved in the making of immersive cinema events, including a very wide range of professions and skills [3]. Through these groundbreaking analyses of immersive cinema production practices, Atkinson's research has demonstrated the fast-developing ways in which new digital technologies and techniques have been applied to cinema: documenting the innovations and disruptions brought about via the integration of digital technologies within existing practices of film exhibition and display [4]. In doing so, the research has exposed significant challenges and opportunities for immersive cinema's further development. This includes the need to address the lack of gender equality within the sector, with Atkinson's work showing that only 14% of virtual reality start-ups are currently led by a woman.

King's research has defined immersive cinema

In addition to showing how immersive cinema is made [2,3], Atkinson's research demonstrated the lack of definitional precision in and around this emerging area of practice. Through her interviews and focus groups, Atkinson documented the lack of a shared and coherent terminology to describe the emerging sector and the work it produces. The research highlighted the obstacles this lack of definitional clarity posed to the sector's development, including uncertainty regarding the status of immersive cinema in respect of intellectual property rights and licensing. Building on her extensive fieldwork and action research, Atkinson made new conceptual contributions by developing clear, empirically grounded definitions of immersive cinema – and related practices such as live cinema – for the first time [1,6].

King's research has demonstrated the value of immersive cinema

Alongside a lack of definitional precision, Atkinson documented the absence of frameworks through which to understand and evaluate the artistic and economic value of these novel forms of cinema practice [3]. Through her interviews and focus groups with audiences and practitioners, Atkinson provided new insights into the value of immersive cinema for those involved, providing detailed accounts of the experiences immersive cinema affords and why they matter to people [3,5]. She also provided new insights into the financial value of these events – including the emerging dynamics of pricing – as exhibitors have tested and developed their offer within the emerging market for immersive cinema experiences in the UK and internationally.

3. References to the research

1. Atkinson, S. and Kennedy, H. W. (Eds.) (2016). Special themed issue: Inside-the-scenes: the rise of experiential cinema. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 13(1), 139–151.
2. Atkinson, S. (2017). 'You sure that's a film, man?': audience anticipation, expectation and engagement in Lost in London LIVE. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 14(2), 697–713, [36].
3. Atkinson, S. and Kennedy, H. W. (Eds.) (2017). *Live Cinema: Cultures, Economies, Aesthetics*. New York: Bloomsbury. Including S. Atkinson, Hangmen Rehanged – Fusing Event Cinema, Live Cinema and Sensory Cinema in the Evolution of Site and Screen Responsive Theatre, pp.243–264.
4. Atkinson, S. (2018). *From Film Practice to Data Process: Production Aesthetics and Representational Practices of a Film Industry in Transition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
5. Atkinson, S. and Kennedy, H. W. (2018). *Extended Reality Ecosystems: Innovations in Creativity and Collaboration*. *Refractory: A Journal of Entertainment Media*, 30(2018), [10].
6. Atkinson, S. and Kennedy, H. W. (2019). The Live Cinema Paradox: Continuity and Innovation in Live Film Broadcast, Exhibition and Production. In Batty, C., Berry, M., Dooley, K., Frankham, B. and Kerrigan, S. (Eds.), *The Palgrave Handbook of Screen Production*, pp.335–346. London: Palgrave MacMillan.

4. Details of the impact

King's research has transformed understanding and awareness of the immersive cinema sector amongst arts funders and the wider entertainment sector. This has led to positive changes for a wide range of beneficiaries, including: Arts Council England (ACE), professionals working within immersive cinema production chains – including film festival staff, distributors and exhibitors – and audiences. By defining immersive cinema and demonstrating how the sector works, Atkinson's research has directly contributed to the development of a new cinematic culture at the intersection of live and digital; enabling sector growth via increased funding opportunities, steps towards workforce equality, increased attendance and new audience experiences.

Pathways to impact were established via the highly collaborative nature of the research design – including the action research partnerships developed between King's and leading immersive cinema practitioners and the central role Atkinson's work played in establishing the Live Cinema Network.

Benefits and changes for arts funders

Enabling Arts Council England to pivot in its funding policy

Due to Atkinson's research, ACE now funds live and immersive cinema. Atkinson's research on immersive cinema and its dissemination via high-profile public reports commissioned by ACE ('Live Cinema in the UK') and Creative Europe Media ('Live Cinema in the EU') – and the Live Cinema Conference bringing together the immersive cinema sector for the first time – led to her being invited to act as an expert consultant on ACE's 'From Live-to-Digital' report, through which ACE came to expand the scope of its funding.

ACE's Director, Research, explains that *"In 2016 I was delighted to be introduced to Professor Atkinson's work on immersive cinema. In May of that year I attended the major conference she organised at King's College London. It was only with this event and the research that underpinned it that this group of practitioners began to recognise themselves as the immersive cinema sector for the first time, rather than a loosely associated set of practitioners. Professor Atkinson was subsequently asked to act as a consultant on Arts Council England's report, 'From Live-to-Digital', which has played a key role in ACE expanding the range of activities we fund. Her research directly shaped its key findings and messages."* [A] Drawing on King's research, in 2016 ACE thereby became the first public funder in the country to provide substantial financial support to live and immersive cinema. It has continued to fund live cinema in the years since, and this is now an established, legitimised area of ACE-funded activity, explicitly named in guidance to applicants as 'live cinema' [B]. As ACE's Director, Research explains, *"In 2020 ACE moved towards explicitly including 'Live Cinema' as a named area of funded activity, naming it in our funding application information sheet for the first time. This is a [...] significant testimony to the impact that King's research has had on our work, and on the development of immersive cinema in the UK."* [A]

Benefits and changes for immersive cinema practitioners

Enabling immersive film practitioners to access new funding opportunities

The expansion of ACE's funding remit to include immersive cinema has benefited the wide range of practitioners involved in producing these events. As ACE's Director, Research, explains, Atkinson's work *"played a direct and central role in establishing the research base that enabled Arts Council England to better understand the immersive cinema sector. We use our investments not only to support individual organisations but also the production chains and ecosystems of which they are a crucial part."* For example, he explains, *"Through the 2020 Cultural Recovery Fund – which serves to support arts and culture during the Covid-19 pandemic – ACE invested £977,000 in Secret Cinema. This organisation currently employs 32 permanent staff. But its reach extends far beyond this core group. Each of its productions involves hundreds of professionals from actors to plumbers, set designers, illusionists to videographers, chefs, makeup artists, composers, animators, bartenders, security, dancers, web developers and sound technicians. Moreover, Secret Cinema holds its events in under-used urban spaces which it reanimates through its events, working in collaboration with local authorities and communities in doing so. It employs local residents in productions wherever possible, offers filmmaking courses, back to work schemes, and workshops in schools. Secret Cinema's enormous success in this country has now led to productions in China and in the USA: making immersive cinema one of the UK's most notable recent cultural exports."* [A] In enabling ACE to expand its funding remit, Atkinson's research has benefited this large and diverse range of practitioners and communities.

Enabling immersive cinema practitioners to achieve recognition for their work

New understandings of how immersive cinema works, how it can be defined and what its value is have made possible the formation of new communities of practice. Atkinson's research defined the sector for the first time and, via the Live Cinema conference she organised at King's in 2016, a new organisation formed on the basis of her research: the Live Cinema Network.

Atkinson is the founder and chair of the Live Cinema Network steering group, which includes the National Theatre, Royal Opera House, Live Cinema UK, Light Surgeons, Event Cinema Association and Rooftop Film Club. The Founder-Director of Live Cinema UK, said that *"Without Atkinson's research, the Live Cinema Network would not have formed, and professionals working in this area would remain a dispersed set of individuals. The research has enabled the definitive articulation of what live cinema is and why it matters to practitioners and to audiences. This has*

been essential for the development of my own organisation, Live Cinema UK, and for the growth of the sector. By defining immersive cinema, showing how it works and demonstrating its value, Atkinson's research has led to the development of new communities of creative practice, facilitating stronger advocacy for what we do." [C]

This greater ability to advocate for immersive cinema to arts funders and within the wider entertainment sector has facilitated significant changes in industry policy and practice, such as immersive cinema's identification by Filmbankmedia as *"a distinctive category of film exhibition"* [D] for the purposes of issuing exhibition licenses, ensuring that it is no longer a fringe activity and is instead given official recognition within industry monitoring and licensing processes.

Enabling immersive cinema practitioners to advocate for gender equality within the sector

By supporting the development of immersive cinema as a coherent sector rather than a loose set of unaffiliated practitioners and by demonstrating gender inequalities within the workforce, Atkinson's research has raised awareness of gender inequality in virtual reality and related careers [E,F], *"enabling advocacy for greater gender equality within immersive cinema employment practices"* [C].

Atkinson brought together 20 virtual reality professionals to discuss her research findings, who collectively established a 'vision' to improve employment practices to diversify workforces. Stakeholders included BAME in Games and the BBC. The 'Vision for Women and Virtual Reality' (VWVR) was formally launched at two tech conferences: the New Festival, Stuttgart, and the Augmented World Expo, Munich. The VWVR has been shared widely at industry conferences and expos, including a virtual reality event held by Google for International Women's Day, attended by 200 brands and social media influencers. The CEO of Limina Immersive said that *"the VWVR and the research underpinning it has raised awareness of gender disparity within the sector, and is already leading to positive changes in employment practices"* [G]. The Knowledge Transfer Network Manager of Immerse UK added that Atkinson's research, and the VWVR it enabled, *"increased our collective ability to advocate for improved employee support practices, in order to diversify workforces in immersive cinema. It has provided us with the knowledge and the language to make change happen."* [H]

Benefits and changes for audiences

Benefiting audiences via expanding immersive cinema practice and programming

By supporting and expanding immersive cinema practice in the UK and internationally, King's research has not only benefited immersive cinema practitioners but has *"hugely benefitted audiences"* [I] too. Festivals have expanded their programming due to Atkinson's research, such as the Motovun festival in Croatia, whose director explains, *"Drawing directly upon Professor Atkinson's research we produced our biggest live cinema event TUVALU LIVE, which put our production abilities on a higher level and gave our audiences the chance for a very new experience – not only watching the film with the live soundtrack, but taking part in creating live film music themselves. Following that project we ... have made immersive cinema a regular part of Motovun Film Festival"* [I].

Atkinson's research also enabled new approaches to programming at the Sheffield International Documentary Festival, the largest and most influential festival of its kind in the UK. As the CEO of Live Cinema UK explains, *"Atkinson's research made possible the Live Cinema Summit at the Sheff Doc Fest in 2018: leading the festival to programme immersive cinema and making it possible for hundreds of festival audience members to experience this kind of theatrical cinematic performance for the first time."* [C]

The greatest benefits to audiences from Atkinson's research have been achieved via the expansion of ACE's funding remit: now investing in production companies such as Secret Cinema and in organisations supporting the immersive cinema sector as a whole – in particular, Live Cinema UK. As ACE's Director, Research, explains, *"Since funding the organisation for the first time in 2016, ACE has increased its investment year-on-year, in recognition of the reach and significance of Live Cinema UK's work in supporting this emerging sector. It is the country's leading organisation dedicated to producing, promoting and researching live cinema events, reaching over 400,000 live audience members, and collaborating with over 60 partners across more than 10 countries."* [A]

Atkinson's research has benefited thousands of audiences in the UK and internationally. As ACE's Director, Research, puts it, *"All of this activity undertaken both within single organisations*

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and the networks they support would not take place without the investment of Arts Council England – made possible by the development in our funding and commissioning policies since 2016. By enabling ACE to make this pivot in its funding priorities, over the past four years Professor Atkinson’s work has directly benefitted a large number of professionals and communities, as well as thousands of audience members – and future audiences in the years to come.” [A]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- A. Arts Council England, Director, Research. Testimonial.
- B. Arts Council England. National Lottery Project Grants, Creative Media and Digital Activity, Information Sheet.
- C. Live Cinema UK, CEO. Testimonial.
- D. Filmbankmedia, Sales Manager. Testimonial.
- E. *Digital Planet*, BBC World Service. Interview with Atkinson and double feature on the VWVR, 13.11.19. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/w3cswhf7>
- F. Onanuga, T. (2019) Virtual reality: how women are taking a leading role in the sector. *The Guardian*, 28.05.19. <https://www.theguardian.com/careers/2019/may/28/virtual-reality-how-women-are-taking-a-leading-role-in-the-sector>
- G. Limina Immersive, CEO. Testimonial.
- H. Immerse UK, Knowledge Transfer Network Manager. Testimonial.
- I. Motovun Film Festival, Festival Director. Testimonial.